Causality, Action and Effective History : Remarks on Gadamer, von Wright and Others

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Abstract

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Hermeneutics should take Gadamer's claims about experience and reality seriously, the hermeneutic urgency, described in the following concise ways:

"aus der Wahrheit des Erinnerns etwas entgegensetzen: das immer noch und immer wieder Wirkliche." WuM, p. XXVI.

"eine *Erfahrung*, die Wirklichkeit erfährt und selber wirklich ist." WuM, p. 329.

"Die Erfahrung lehrt, Wirkliches anzuerkennen." WuM, p. 339.

preceded by a general remark about the aim of historical knowledge:

"eine Erkenntnis, die versteht, daß etwas so ist, weil sie versteht, daß es so gekommen ist". WuM, p. 2.

This indicates an *ontological primacy of history*, which is a singular processual event (*Geschehen*) with a certain narrative dimension which can also be called history (*Geschichte*). Through this essential and at the same time particular finitude, meaning is given to us – and all the general aspects of explained reality are possible only inside such an effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) which unites event and narration. The article will elaborate the special character of historical *effects* compared to the effects in the modern scheme of *cause* and *effect* and suggest a way of reading the classical distinction between understanding and explanation in a way which somewhat differs from Gadamer's, but also from Georg Henrik von Wright's similar concerns. It is also argued that Dilthey's notion of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) remains relevant inside a very much needed hermeneutic effort to include nature in history.

"Das Verstehen ist das vollkommenste Erkennen,
das uns menschlicherweise möglich ist."

J. G. Droysen, *Historik*, p. 26.

Jan-Ivar Lindén

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Explanation and Understanding

In the 20th century there was a virulent discussion concerning the plurality of scientific approaches, especially on the difference between explanation (*Erklären*) and understanding (*Verstehen*). The debate had the advantage of involving scholars of quite different orientation and enable them to discuss important issues in a way which was thematically enough anchored to evince futile, superficial clashes. The background stemmed from discussions in the early 20th century: concerning psychology (Ebbinghaus, Dilthey, Husserl) and concerning the scientific status of historical disciplines (Dilthey, Simmel, Neo-Kantians like Windelband and Rickert and several others). In Germany the Hegelian tradition, with its strong stress on history, was never quite dead as vital currents, influenced by the Hegelian writings of Karl Marx, survived and continued to attract people both inside and outside academia. In the sixties and seventies there was a fruitful context for a revival of these issues because of the hermeneutical tradition with its different declinations, some closer to the Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt school (Habermas, Apel) and others more rooted in the classical sources of German historical tradition with later influences especially from Heidegger (Gadamer). In the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian world philosophers of Wittgensteinian inspiration were developing similar themes, even if in a quite different language. In this context Georg Henrik von Wright wrote his book *Explanation and Understanding* (later followed up in the Woodbridge lectures on *Causality and Determinism*), which had great influence not only on the discussion among so called analytic philosophers. The debate following the seminal works of both Gadamer and von Wright had however a strong tendency to stress the practical character of understanding, in Gadamer present through his concept of *Anwendung* and in von Wright through his Wittgensteinian conviction that meaning is use. This distinguishes both Gadamerian hermeneutics and postwittgensteinian theories of understanding from Dilthey's earlier project, in which the key concept remains that of *Erlebnis* – a notion which expresses something else than use or practical meaning and which gets only negative attention in Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* and in Wittgensteins *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. In Gadamer there was an obvious will to distanciate himself from the so called *Lebensphilosophie*, heavily present both in Germany and elsewhere in the first half of the 20th century. Dilthey and Simmel were two major representatives of this current and both of them wrote on problems of the philosophy of history and on historical method in its difference to the methods of modern natural science, topics also important for Gadamer.

The present situation in our research culture, with its strong stress on a method borrowed from experimental science, has rendered it urgent to both restate and rethink several arguments for the crucial role of historical sciences with their capacity to give a richer articulation of phenomena than what is possible in experimental explanation. We need understanding more than ever, but there are still several ideologies which, mostly in a non-stated way, oppose this particularly important approach to reality: not only the classical positivistic tendency to defend a methodological monism

with the science of nature and thus "explanation" offering the most perfect model for other less precise scientific disciplines, but also the widespread tendency to regard the alternative to nomothetic science as something closely connected with evaluation and the ethical dimension of existence. The later view easily conducts us to a new dualism, not between mind and body (nature) this time, but between morality and reality. Such a constellation entails giving reality to nomothetic science if it only accords us the right to keep up our ethical discourse with its presuppositions of free will and different inherent and irreducible values. In the following I will argue for another solution which attributes a thoroughly *ontological* importance to historical sciences and the understanding stance in general. In this context reflection is the crucial aspect and one can suppose a close connection between understanding and reflection. This is not the point of view of the later Wittgenstein, of Heidegger or of Gadamer. In Heidegger there is a problematic idea of the primacy of future, especially strong in his earlier works, a tendency present also in Gadamer, insofar as he stresses the role of application in understanding and explicitly takes position against what he calls *Reflexionsphilosophie* (even if his concept of "mirroring" speculation somewhat modifies this tendency). Understanding (*Verstehen*) is in *Wahrheit und Methode* also described in terms of an ongoing process (*Vollzug*) and not as instantaneous insight, not as *Verständnis*. Both Wittgenstein and Gadamer are strongly critical against the idea of a lived experience (*Erlebnis*) which would accord meaning to human culture. In Gadamer history becomes more a matter of language and the discussion of history in the second part of his magnum opus is thus logically followed by the ontology of language in the third part. Gadamer explicitly states that the past is not only transmitted, but handed over in the medium of language.[1]

When we, as Gadamer says, „belong to history", this remark is directed against a long tradition of subjectivist presuppositions, which takes a „non-worldly subject" (*weltloses Subjekt*[2]) as its starting point. One can however argue that this critique, legitimate though it is, remains one-sided if the belonging in question is only to a linguistic tradition. This would somehow remain too Hegelian and centred around the spirit, even if Gadamer continuously stresses that there is no „absolute knowledge" (*absolutes Wissen*) and wants to read the *Phenomenology of Spirit* without any inherent teleology.[3] In the following I argue for a complementary perspective, which stresses embodiment or incarnation, i.e. belonging to history also as natural history. As the discussion of embodiment shows – and this already in the writings of Merleau-Ponty, himself influenced by the earlier French tradition combining naturalism with spiritualism: Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, Bergson – there can however be no question of reducing the natural aspects of history to the objective sphere of natural science. This was also an important point in the philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*), in which the concept of life mostly signified exactly a nature which precedes and grounds experience and knowledge – and thus cannot be explained by something "natural" a posteriori given through objectification. If life is part of history, there is more than language in our belonging to history. To use the words *Erleben* and *Erlebnis* for this dimension still seems adequate.

Is it plausible to say that vital processes in our history are best understood when they are going on as *Vollzug* or should one perhaps to the contrary claim that understanding is closely connected with interruption and a concomitant turning from intentional direction into the future to a backwards oriented, more contemplative kind of experience? Not application and intention would then be decisive, but reflection. William James, who was not very complaisant with this kind of

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[1] "Was auf dem Wege der sprachlicher Überlieferung auf uns gekommen ist, ist nicht übriggeblieben, sondern es wird übergeben, d. h. es wird uns gesagt /.../", H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1975, p. 367. Cf. also p. 340.

[2] M. Heidegger *Sein und Zeit,* Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1986, p. 206.

[3] H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode,* p. 286.

stance, accused some philosophers of too much "understanding backwards".[4] Later pragmatists like Richard Rorty have seen parallels between James and philosophical hermeneutics because of this. Nevertheless, it is not astonishing that concepts like mirroring (*Spekulation*) and *Selbstbesinnung* return in later hermeneutics. This can be taken as an indication of the impossibility of renouncing reflection as central philosophical category.

Efficient Causality and Action

In Georg Henrik von Wright's discussion of explanation and understanding in his book with the same name, the focus is on the mediating concept of action. Action is intermediary because on the one hand carried by intentions, which according to von Wright constitute an essential dimension of what we call history,[5] thus distinguished from nature, and on the other hand action is closely linked to the kind of experimental procedure which is so essential in modern natural sciences. In other words, there is no explanation in experimental science without somebody carrying out experiments, i.e. without human action. Causality stands in an analogical relation to action.[6] Explanation is a way of managing the results of experiments, but the action behind this research is intentional and thus a historical phenomenon which as action can be understood (and not only explained). In order to clarify his point von Wright offers a detailed analysis of causation, which has its background in Hume's scepticism concerning causal necessity. It has to be mentioned that von Wright explicitly states that his concept of causality is a narrow one, chosen with the aim of clarifying the role of action in causality.[7] Questions about other kinds of causality, like those in the Aristotelian tradition, are thus bracketed, even if von Wright refers to Aristotle on other points, especially when it comes to the role of the practical syllogism in human action. Causality is analysed through a combination of logical and empirical perspectives, in which the distinction between necessary and sufficient reasons plays an important role. Another key notion is that of counterfactuals, which according to von Wright have a defining character in human action. An action presupposes a certain conviction that the thing done has certain consequences and that other possible actions would have had other consequences (the counterfactual criterion "how it would have been if ____").[8]

Hume tried to solve the problem of causation with the idea of regularities in experience, recurrent successions which become convincing through habituation. Much has been written on this and this is no place to repeat or resume these discussions. I only state the problem that regularity seems to be insufficient as explanation of causality as there are several very strong regularities,

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[4] W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism (The Works of William James)*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London 1976, p 121.

[5] It is a recurrent mode of thought to conceive action as a fundamental characteristic of the historical process. Cf. the notion of "Handlungssinn" (opposed to narrative "Deutungssinn") in J. Rohbeck, "Handlungstheorie und Geschichtsphilosophie" in *Geschichtsphilosophie. Stellenwert und Aufgaben in der Gegenwart (Wiener Jahrbuch für Philosophie* XLVI/2014), New academic press, Wien 2015. The anthology has several contributions to the problem of history. The boundaries of meaning in the historical process receives an interesting treatment in J. Rüsen, "Sinn und Widersinn der Geschichte – Einige Überlegungen zur Kontur der Geschichtsphilosophie". Concerning these topics, see also E. Angehrn, *Sinn und Nicht-Sinn. Das Verstehen des Menschen,* J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 2011. From an ontological point of view it is extremely important to stress the processual event-character of history (*Geschehen*) as this is what gives the historical process an empirical weight as that which is never possible to reduce to action. History can stand for reality in a way which surpasses human projects precisely because it has this character of a real process, determining what is possible, and what is not. *Gechichte* is not *Gemächte* – even if action of course remains one important element in history.

[6] G. H. von Wright, *Causality and Determinism,* Columbia University Press, USA 1974, p. 51.

[7] G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding,* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1971, p. 36-7.

[8] *Causality and Determinism,* p. 53. Cf. also p. 120.

which we would not explain through a causal link between the states in this connection. (Night comes after day quite regularly, but we would not say that day is the cause of night.) A causal connection must have a more specific character and it is exactly this which von Wright tries to describe in *Explanation and Understanding* and in the later lectures on *Causality and Determinism*.[9]

It is essential for a causal relationship in the modern sense that we can separate cause and effect. At the same time the challenge in every theory of causality is to show a very firm connection between cause and effect. Without this link there is no causal influence, but without separation of cause and effect, the process seems to become a single one without the possibility of speaking of a cause different from its effect. The instrumental interest in causality lies exactly in the fact that we can isolate causes and, because of their "generic" and identifiable character, possibly reproduce them in other contexts, thus master phenomena, induce effects. Interference becomes possible through the isolation of causes, which however somehow keep their link to effects even when isolated. The possibility to experiment in this way and manipulate phenomena is nevertheless often not given at all. This concerns the past, but also spatially inaccessible phenomena. The great revolution in the beginning of the modern era, as the ontological distinction between a sublunar and translunar sphere was abolished, resided however precisely in the fact that familiar principles of terrestrial physics were not anymore radically separated from what happened elsewhere in the universe.[10] Theories based on practically possible experiments were accordingly possible to use for explanations of the universe, for a reality which is mainly beyond experimental reach. This created a new scheme for research. Through the experimental concept of experience with its strong stress on interference, and thus on action, science was not anymore the primary expression of what the ancients called *vita contemplativa* (*bios theoretikos*).

When von Wright tells us that action is logically prior to experimental causation and that there is an analogical relation between action and causation, this does not of course mean that there would be causal relationships only where we can act upon something. Neither does it mean that causes are regarded as practical agents with intentions. The claim is rather that specifically causal relations (in the modern sense of efficient causality) appear only inside the world of acting beings (like ourselves). Without the existence of such acting beings there would certainly be a lot of relations and connections, but not of the causal kind. Efficient causality concerns a property of relations where causes can be separated from their effects, but at the same time remain linked to these effects in a general ("generic") way, which (theoretically) makes it possible to recreate the effect through identical causes. This is crucial in experimental science and also explains the possible technical inventions created by this kind of research. The pragmatic interest is however

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[9] Humean regularity is thus not sufficient as explanation of causality. Some presuppositions of von Wright's argument must perhaps be stated: Causality is still a fundamental scientific concept, not as Russell claimed 1912 in "On the Notion of Cause" – in B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, Penguin, London 1953 –, obsolete and replaceable by the concept of function (von Wright refers to the critique of Russell in Ernest Nagel, "The Types of Causal Explanation in Science" in *Cause and Effect*, The Free Press, New York 1965 and Patrick Suppes, *A Probabilistic Theory of Causality,* North-Holland, Amsterdam 1970.) There are states of affairs on the one hand and epistemic attitudes (like certainty) on the other. In a larger setting the relation is one between nature and the social world of human action and the questions concerning causality are thus implied in a larger context, which is directly linked to the relation between *Erklären* and *Verstehen*. In *Explanation and Understanding* von Wright speaks of an *ontic* domain and an *epistemic* one and seems to mean natural reality by ontic phenomena. The epistemic aspect is related to our stance towards the ontic sphere. (The notion "ontic" is here not, as in Heidegger, the corollary to "ontological".) Concerning the notion of causality and its persistent importance, see also M. Bunge, *Causality. The Place of the Causal Principle in Modern Science*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts 1959.

[10] The distinction between a sublunar sphere with finite movements and a translunar sphere of eternal circular completion is one expression of the Greek belief that there must be something stable, if we shall have our finite world of possibilities.

there even when there is no actual possibility to interfere (as in "remote parts of the universe"[11] or in past evolution, which is not possible to influence anymore). In the causalist world view of experimental science, the world shows itself as a field of possible interference, even when the possibility remains completely theoretical. Already Francis Bacon, fervent defender of practically useful science, knew that this kind of science is not the same as technical manipulation.[12]

In von Wright's interventionist theory of causation the possibility to change the course of things is a criterion of action – and this also in cases where we let something be, because letting something be also presupposes possible alternatives. One can resume some conditions which render the concept of causation possible in the following way: Cause and effect must be possible to distinguish, they must have a generic character which makes identification possible independently of a definite situation and there must be regularities in what happens, which facilitate the instrumental orientation. These aspects are especially obvious in experiments, where we test possible effects. What makes states of affairs repeatable is their generic character. The same phenomenon can exist in different instances and if this phenomenon is a sufficient cause, it can also have similar effects in different instances. If we are able to create such states of affairs, we have the potential initiative in processes, i.e. we can create causes in order to have effects. However, often our capacity is limited and the possibility to influence the course of things is only theoretical. What remains is nevertheless the way of looking at the world as a field of possible causal influence.[13]

This also means that every reductionist tendency to explain action by causation (in the above mentioned modern sense) is condemned to failure as such causation presupposes the scheme represented by action. There is thus a logical reason why experimental causality never can be an argument for universal determinism.[14] As von Wright concludes: "The clue to an understanding of the explanation of the epistemic problem here thus lies in the logical peculiarities of the concept of action."[15]

Causality is a scheme which is established in action with its need for orientation, prevision and direct manipulation. An argument against the interventionist theory of causation has been that it would be circular insofar as causation is explained by agents who themselves cause effects. This counterargument is however not valid. The issue is not to explain non-intentional causation by intentional causation, but to understand the genealogy of the causal scheme. This is relevant concerning another counterargument, too, namely that the interventionist theory would be anthropocentric in too much stressing manipulation. As already stated, a causal scheme does not presuppose real possibilities to manipulate, but it still offers a way of regarding the world. It is not "anthropocentric" to state the anthropomorphic character inherent in certain schemes of thought.

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[11] *Causality and Determinism*, p. 60. There are some similarities between the idea of a divine creator and the experimentalist conception of causality. Even God would need counterfactuals, if creation is to be called an action. Cf. *ibid*., p. 108-9. It would however be difficult to extract generic conceptual identity from a comparison between the history of the world as it is given and other "possible" worlds as we have no experience of such possible worlds. That there is a theoretical interest in "possible worlds" shows in fact that we easily project the counterfactual criterion of action – which is a sort of play with possibilities – on an ontological process in which there is no agent. The need to do so certainly has a theological background, but one can have doubts about how meaningful it is to personalize divinity as such an universal agent and maker of worlds.

[12] F. Bacon, *Novum Organum* I.3. English translation in F. Bacon, *The New Organon (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy)*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000.

[13] *Explanation and Understanding,* p. 60-4, 81.

[14] *Causality and Determinism*, p. 110ff. This renders the physicalist discussions of free will highly questionable. See in a similar manner M. Heidelberger, “Freedom and Science! The Presumptuous Metaphysics of Free-Will Disdainers” in *Psychology’s Territories* (ed. Ash, M. & Sturm, Th.), Lawrence Erlbaum, Berlin 2007. Concerning a more critical treatment of von Wright's theory, see M. Heidelberger, "Kausalität. Eine Problemübersicht" in *Neue Hefte für Philosophie* 32/33, 1992.

[15] *Causality and Determinism*, p. 39.

Quite to the contrary, such a self-awareness can prevent us from projecting this kind of schemes on all reality and regard everything as a sphere of only instrumentally interesting relations. It seems more plausible to distinguish between real patterns – which are not dependent on instrumental interest – and such patterns appearing inside the instrumental scheme of causation.[16] There is however an important ontological remark to add: not only human beings act. It is thus possible that the causal scheme is not strictly anthropomorphic, but founded in a larger community of acting beings. We are however most familiar with human action and this sphere is thus not such a bad starting point for understanding something about what causation is all about.

The word "intention" in von Wright's book *Explanation and Understanding* could be translated into German as *Absicht* (or in the Swedish mother tongue of von Wright, *avsikt*). In his view of action von Wright is close to his professorial predecessor in Cambridge and shares to a large extent the intentionalist conception, defended by another of the three literary executors of Wittgensteins work, Elisabeth Anscombe. His use of the practical syllogism is within this context.[17] This is the aspect of intentionality philosophers close to the later Wittgenstein or William James tend to stress.[18] From within a phenomenological perspective this would only be one aspect of intentionality. For Husserl intention is mainly a function which constitutes unity in experience – and this not only in action. In the following I will presuppose von Wrights teleological concept of intention. We intend to do what is still not the case but would like to see realized.

In his conception of understanding (*Verstehen*) von Wright stresses the intentional aspects of history. He is in fact here closer to the voluntarist conception of Johann Gustav Droysen[19] than to Wilhelm Dilthey, whose notion of expression (*Ausdruck*) covers non-intentional attitudes, too.[20] von Wright himself notices the specific character of his concept of intentionality and leaves the question if there could also be a genuinely historical non-intentional teleology open. His preliminary answer in *Explanation and Understanding* leaves out such a possibility and there is instead a strong tendency to regard historical aspects which are not intentional as only quasi-teleological phenomena best studied with cybernetic and statistical means – something which would in the final analysis imply that these aspects can be explained, but not understood.[21] Later on this tendency is even more explicit and von Wright gives a negative answer to the question of whether there can be a non-intentional teleology in history, a Hegelian "List der Vernunft".[22] Like so many 20th century philosophers and scientists, von Wright briefly mentions "vitalists" and claims that such currents of thought are confusing "purposive" intention with only systemic "purposeful" functions, which should be explained through other scientific methods (the main example being cybernetics).[23] These

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[16] Cf. James F. Woodward, "Agency and Interventionist Theories" in *The Oxford Handbook of Causation* (ed. Helen Beebee, Christopher Hitchcock and Peter Menzies), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, especially p. 235-6, 253.

[17] *Explanation and Understanding,* p. 26-7.

[18] What tends to disappear in the distinction between modern causality and (voluntary) intentionality is the psychical presence, so important for theorists of *Einfühlung*. Empathy as a basic concept of understanding is mentioned (*Explanation and Understanding*, p. 6), but von Wright does not give it any importance in his own discussion.

[19] J. G. Droysen, *Historik. Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, Verlag von R. Oldenburg, München und Berlin 1937. Cf. Gadamer's remark "Die hermeneutische Reduktion auf die Meinung des Urhebers ist ebenso unangemessen wie bei geschichtlichen Ereignissen die Reduktion auf die Absicht der Handelnden." *Wahrheit und Methode,* p. 355.

[20] The fact that Dilthey in one expression of his central idea of hermeneutic community as the basis of historical understanding rediscovers Vicos formula of man making history (G. B. Vico, *La scienza nuova*, 331, 332 & 349) and states that "der, welcher die Geschichte erforscht, derselbe ist, der die Geschichte macht" – should not blur the fact that Dilthey's stress is on lived experience in which will (and making) is only one aspect. W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* VII, p. 278. Cf. *ibid*., p.191.

[21] *Explanation and Understanding,* p. 22-9.

[22] *Ibid*., p. 154.

[23] *Ibid*., p. 60.

remarks are quite general and would certainly merit further differentiation. The principal insight remains however convincing: modern causality is an offspring of human voluntary orientation. Causal reductions of human action are thus inconsistent. Causal determinism is meaningful only within closed systems ("fragments of the world's history"[24]) and can never constitute a solid ground for reductionist theories of action.

Nature and Effective History

This argument is valid even if we were to regard human action differently. One can also suppose that von Wright's critique of reductionist attempts in the theory of action would profit from a more Aristotelian view, where the existence of causes in action does not imply any reductionism at all. The Aristotelian bent in Gadamer's hermeneutics can be helpful in this context even if there is a certain one-sidedness in Gadamer's approach because of his continuous stress of the linguistic aspects of experience. ("Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache."[25])

Historical conditions as a factor which determine human conduct are recognized by von Wright, but he does not – like Gadamer – elaborate the ontological implications of historically predisposed agents. His preoccupations in action theory are different. In the ethical writings of von Wright and in the deontic logic which we associate with his name, these issues are developed as a relation between norm and action. That there is influence not only as causal relation between cause and effect, but also as efficient history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), springing forth from our belonging to real processes with a lot of given conditions, is not the main topic for von Wright. He mentions these questions in the beginning of *Explanation and Understanding*, but they disappear in his ambition to contrast cybernetic and intentional perspectives on human experience.

There are several interesting hints in *Explanation and Understanding*, where the author explicitly states what he will not be speaking about. One of them concerns the Aristotelian theory of causes, which does not share the experimentalist character of modern causality. There is also a short discussion of "retrodictions", which seem somehow connected with the important idea of research beginning with the familiar and then arriving at its essential background. This interesting key to historical understanding is not further developed in von Wright's book. Concerning the difference between predictions and retrodictions,[26] his examples are taken from natural science (geology, cosmogony) and the ontological importance of retrodictions in a more general setting is not the topic. In this case, too, the absence could be regarded as an invitation to further elaborations, especially on retrodictions in relation to historical reflection.[27]

As in every discussion of explanation and understanding, the centre of gravity in von Wright's discussion concerns the relation between mankind and nature. For von Wright it seems clear that the empirical method as such is linked to experimental mastery over nature and if there is something else of importance – and there certainly is according to von Wright – it is stated in the

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[24] *Ibid.*, p. 82.

[25] *Wahrheit und Methode,* p. 450.

[26] *Explanation and Understanding*, p. 58-9.

[27] Cf. the omniscient demon of Laplace, with its both retrodictive and predictive capacities, used as an example by von Wright, *Causality and Determinism,* p. 115-9. Cf. also the remarks on pre-determination and post-determination, on what is possible to predict and what is possible to understand. *Explanation and Understanding*, p. 160-7. Here the important question is however only followed up by a discussion of statistics on the micro and macro level. One could however say that historical pre-determination is the sphere of that which is retroactively understandable, whereas instrumental determination is a means of predicting future, needing explanation of the past mainly from this instrumental perspective. Cf. however von Wright's short remark on cultural belonging as conceptual background, *Causality and Determinism,* p. 55.

following way: man is part of nature, too, "but man as agent may have a different status". The natural part of human existence seems to be regarded as the domain of explanatory natural sciences, which brings us back to the "facts of nature".[28] As a long tradition of philosophy of nature without objectivist presuppositions (embodiment, lived experience) shows, there is however no reason to hand over nature to experimental science in this way and when von Wright tends in this direction, it is only to be regretted.

Concerning von Wright's analysis of the relation between action and causation, it is important to stress that he understands actions and their consequences in a different way than the relation between causes and effects. The action is not the cause and the following state of affairs an effect, but actions are intentional in a more intimate way, where the result cannot be strictly separated from the action – as it is already there in the beginning as something intended. As a realized consequence of an action, the result can however be the cause of further effects, but in this case the relation is not intentional anymore. There is, thus, no voluntary cause in action, possible to isolate, but a beginning logically connected with the intentional result.[29]

The conception of intentionality is here voluntarist and the idea seems to be that an agent initiates his action through the intention. The Aristotelian topic of postponed action in deliberation is not present even if von Wright's use of the practical syllogism could have motivated such a complementary perspective. This is probably explained by the fact that von Wright has accepted the common attitude toward non-intentional teleology as something which can be replaced with more adequate views stemming from explanatory science. Against this attitude one can remind of the fact that Aristotelian teleology has something important to say about the striving character of life itself, and that this would indicate that intentionality is something quite natural – and present everywhere in nature where something is desired. This kind of "entelechies" must not be attributed to the domain of modern objectivating science – what created the dispute about vitalism – but can be regarded as an essential trait of striving nature – and as something which precedes the distinction between subject and object.

The main argument of von Wright is convincing independently of all this. Every reduction of human action to causal determination depends on a mistake if causation is taken in the sense of modern experimental science. The causation which is here regarded as fundamental is in fact dependent of just that kind of action, which one purports to reduce to causation. In the following the ambition will however not be to "reconcile" naturalist "determinism" and practical freedom – the major question of von Wright – but to attribute an ontological *priority* to the historical process for which unchangeable past is as characteristic as present variability related to the open margins of the future. The now is that decisive tiny presence which makes an irrevocably given out of something possible.

What remains are questions about the essence of human action, especially about its relationship to intentionality and concerning man's position in nature. In this case, other forms of causality than the experimental one seem to be important. There is a relation between history and natural history which is present in human experience independently of the capacity to master nature through experimentalist methods with their interest in controlled events which cause effects. This is already evident because the past has already happened and does not allow variation, but still heavily influences us. It should be noticed that the notion of effect (*Wirkung*) is crucial in the hermeneutic conception of history as effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). The "causes" of such "effects" have however very little in common with the causes of experimental science. They are neither possible to isolate nor to regard as generically identical, they are holistic in character and as a not anymore modifiable past they influence cultural and epistemic orientation, and finally, they also concern

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[28] *Causality and Determinism,* p. 54-8, 104 and *Explanation and Understanding*, p. 73-4.

[29] *Ibid*., p. 64-74, 88-96.

every researcher as a person involved in the historical process. In Gadamer this is expressed in the following way: "In Wahrheit gehört die Geschichte nicht uns, sondern wir gehören ihr."[30] If there are lacunas in von Wright's discussion of causation and action, the same is however true for Gadamer's account of historicity, insofar as he mostly leaves the natural aspects of effective history without consideration. It is here that a step backwards to the earlier philosophy of life can be of interest, especially because of the reflections on history which constitute an important part of this current of thought (Dilthey, Simmel, and to a lesser extent, Bergson – and earlier, in his own peculiar way, Nietzsche).

Essential Singularity

We are not necessarily *immediately* concerned by historical processes and events, which we understand. However, if we are not concerned at all, we don't understand anything. The more analogies a historical event has with our own historical predetermination, our own dependencies, possibilities and our given situation, the richer our understanding can be. In explanation there is another kind of analogy: the greater the possibility to transpose generic forms of inference into areas less accessible than the sphere of immediate action, the greater is also the capacity of causal explanation.

History is not only a narrative, a matter of interpretations, but interpretations and narratives influence the course of history, have effects in the larger historical sense of the term. The earthquake in Lisbon happened, but was also interpreted in different ways, not at least in the theological context known as the theodicy. These interpretations had several historical consequences. There is in history a continuous interaction between what is told (the narrative dimension) and what happened. What is given in a historical context can be something like an earthquake, but this natural fact has in history a different meaning than in seismological predictions, one main difference being that we are more directly concerned by a nature with historical expression in singular events. A natural phenomenon like an earthquake is differently given when it involves the full experience of concerned beings and not only the measuring regard of methodologically unified subjects. The subjects constituting so called intersubjectivity are highly regulated ones, able to compare their experiential results because they don't question the abstract character of the principles which decide what is relevant, i.e. restrict experience to a certain kind of experiential procedure, in which measurability belongs to the decisive components. As Droysen used to stress, history is also empirical, but the experience in question is richer than in experimental procedures – one could say, not intersubjective, but interpersonal, the difference between subjects and persons being exactly that persons are quite particular characters whereas subjects in the sense of modern philosophy of subjectivity (Descartes, Kant...) are instances of epistemic reason, bringing crystalline order into the world.

There is in the discussion of causation the assumption that connections in the empirical world are either accidental or lawlike ("nomic"). This scheme is somewhat difficult when it comes to the historical dimension of reality, as the historical past seems to be *definite in its particularity*. Wilhelm Windelband thought that this justified a juxtaposition of "nomothetic" and "idiographic" approaches[31], but tended to underestimate the ontological importance of particularity. This importance becomes crucial, if every nomothetic form of knowledge is an expression of its cultural basis and thus is a phenomenon *inside* a definite particular historical process. Often this kind of historicity was regarded as something which conducts us to relativism. This is not at all evident if

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[30] *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 281.

[31] Wilhelm Windelband, *Präludien. Aufsätze und Reden zur Einleitung in die Philosophie,* J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1907.

relativism is understood as something which denies foundations. Precisely the unmodifiable givenness of past history is a foundation and in present efforts one tries to find a meaningful place in this setting. The meanings differ depending on the domain. In morality some meanings are fundamental, in natural science others – and we have a sense for validity, which is also a product of anterior history. The fact that the past is given is of course no reason to give up all normative standards which constitute an essential part of this heritage – but one can add that exactly our historicity reminds us, how important continuous self-critique must be. This form of critical rationality is something different than the instrumental rationality, which only sees value in possible innovations, use and utility. Non-nomic (not lawlike) connections must not necessarily be accidental, but can also express a particularly fixed historical background with determining influence on us, a uniquely singular process, which one could describe as essential particularity. In this case the alternative between lawlike and accidental relations would be misleading.

Causality and Ontological Patterns

Two positions in contemporary discussions of causality are particularly interesting from an ontological point of view: 1) the already described possibility to regard causality as a function of possible action and 2) to situate causation inside a dispositional ontology which takes real powers as something constitutive of being as such.[32] In the latter case there is a shift in focus from experimental causation to a causal structure of reality. This latter perspective is ontologically interesting, but the question is, if the modern concept of causation – understood as possibility of both influential connection and separability of cause and effect – is still adequate in such a dispositional theory.

In my present text a view similar to the first one is defended when it concerns causality in the modern sense, but combined with an ontology of real patterns which reminds of the second view, however without taking for aim to attribute causality to being as such. It is argued that dispositions (or real patterns) indeed are something ontologically crucial, but that these patterns only through agents become specifically causal relationships in the modern sense.

It is legitimate to regard causality as a function of possible action, but it should then once more be repeated that causality does not imply any given capacity to directly influence the course of things. As a scheme of action causality offers us a way of regarding the world as a sphere of possible action even when we have no means to influence things. Reality is however more than a possible sphere of action and this is why we should not confuse real patterns with causation. The existence of real patterns means that there are dispositions for processual events which exist even when nothing is actually happening. This quite Aristotelian conception stresses the second sense of *dynamis* in Aristotle,[33] which means exactly an already given capacity which is not necessarily actual.

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[32] For a general overview, see *The Oxford Handbook of Causation* (ed. Helen Beebee, Christopher Hitchcock and Peter Menzies), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, and concerning powers especially the contribution of Stephen Mumford, "Causal Powers and Capacities". Cf. S. Mumford, *Dispositions*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998. There is something convincing in the effort to leave the Humean perspective with its stress on connection between discrete entities behind, but if this step leads to a "dispositional essentialism" it seems to me that the *separation* of cause and effect necessary for instrumental value is lost. This is not a problem from an ontological point of view and an ontology of dispositions is an extremely interesting philosophical issue, but without the interventionist perspective it does not seem to clarify the dominant causalist attitude of the modern era. Dispositions offer predetermination, not causality (in the modern sense).

[33] *De anima* 417 a.

Real patterns have a determining function and influence how future events are shaped in particular situations. This influence is not a causal efficiency in the modern sense. Once more: modern causality is not only a question about a causal *nexus* between cause and effect, but as much a matter of *separating* cause and effect, especially of isolating causes in order to check their relations to effects in other contexts. This is crucial for the instrumental interest in research concerning causation. We can in many cases bring about the effects through controlled causes and thus manipulate processes. In processes governed by real patterns (without any interested agents) there is no such isolation of causes because the pattern itself covers the whole process, even if it can be interrupted in its actualisation. One should thus not confound this kind of predetermination with modern causation. Symptomatic in this context is that it is quite difficult to find an equivalent of the modern conceptual couple cause - effect in Aristotle's remarks on *aitia*.[34]

How the agent is influenced in his natural and social tendencies, how he is driven by desire and wish, is not causal in the experimental sense. An agent can perhaps foresee reactions of other persons and in that sense be regarding them through the practical scheme of causality, but these persons are then reduced to useful aspects of his own praxis. (Perhaps it is even sometimes possible to have such a distanciated and instrumental relation to one's own body – as for example some phenomena in modern sport would suggest.) Well known are the moral problems of such a view, when it is getting dominant, but there is also a more ontological aspect. As persons both the others and the agent himself are embedded in a world of ongoing tendencies, which constitute their lives, their ambitions, their preferences and their epistemic interests. These influences are manifold and surpass the world of practical projects with its need of isolating causes in causal chains.

If modern causation is a concept of possible action it is important to say something about the difference between actions and other events. As the actions we are most familiar with are human actions, this kind of doings seems to be the natural starting point.[35] Human action is somehow related to free will. Must then the action, which offers the scheme for causality, be a completely voluntary action? Is it possible to define will without recurring to an agent beyond every predetermining influence? Does a free voluntary act presuppose an instance – an archimedic point outside nature and history – which transcends natural, personal, collective and historical influence? If we take Aristotle's view of the voluntary (*hekousion*) as the starting point, the answer is negative. Freedom is connected with deliberation (*bouleusis*) which is rather like a postponing of tendencies already pushing us in a certain direction. To act willingly is in a way to take a decision (*prohairesis*) according to one's wish (*boulesis*) after deliberating. Such a deliberative freedom is rendered possible by a kind of pause, where no possibility is actualized, but several brought into play precisely as possibilities. Bergson will later call such a state a *zone d'indétermination,* a zone of indeterminacy.[36] In action we are not deliberating anymore, but executing something. A certain direction in the course of events has been preferred. What happens is then not totally attributable to the agent (because situation and influence play a role, too), but a certain responsibility is given. The agent can thus feel guilty, ashamed or proud of what has been done. What has happened has happened inside a project of some kind and projects can be very elaborated and skillful in counting with different courses of events. It is in this context that possible interference is interesting as it permits both foresight, orientation and mastery.

When causality is regarded as a scheme of possible action, this does not imply any strong theory about the autonomous status of agents. It is sufficient to have the possibility of distinguishing processes without agents and actively influenced processes (implying agents with a possible sense of responsibility in the above mentioned sense). Causality is what shows itself when

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[34] W. Wieland, *Die aristotelische Physik,* Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1962, p. 266.

[35] To begin with the familiar is a good hermeneutic principle, but should not imply that only human beings could act, which would be false – as a vast ethological literature shows us.

[36] H. Bergson, *Matière et mémoire,* Presses universitaires de France, Paris 1990, p. 36.

agents are perceiving the world with a particular active interest, and this also when they have no possibility of influencing the events. This does not mean that causes are regarded as agents, but only that agents are familiar with the capacity to influence things and thus have a special interest in finding out how reality offers means for possible influence. Even when the means are unattainable and no manipulation of processes is accessible, the causal scheme offers foresight and orientation, two extremely important practical functions.

Being a practical function means for causation that it is as real as many other aspects of the world. There is something in reality permitting this action oriented point of view. There is however no reason to overstress the instrumental aspect and claim that causality would be the fundamental aspect of what is real. Ontologically prior to action is the fact of being involved in reality and in this involvement influence is there, too, but as that of which we are depending, not as objectives in the practical sphere. It is evident that dispositional influence is of crucial ontological importance, when we take into account that the disposing predetermination involves ourselves and directly influences our descriptions of the world. This is also the historical *and* ontological dimension of scientific phenomena.

Reality is the sphere of sufficient *conditions* (not sufficient *reasons*, as a rationalist Leibnizian tradition would have it). The aim of historical understanding is to give the sufficient conditions of why something has a certain character. Experimental explanation is concerned with necessary and sometimes also sufficient *causes*, but not even the experimentally sufficient causes are sufficient historical conditions, even if it can sometimes be meaningful to describe them as necessary historical conditions. Mostly the latter kind of statements have something farfetched, however, like the remark that oxygen was a necessary condition for the Russian revolution. Similar problems concern the use of neurophysiology as explanation of meaningful psychic life. There are certainly a lot of necessary processes in the brain and in other parts of the body, when a person undertakes or experiences something, but in order to have the sufficient conditions for his behaviour we have to change perspective and especially take the history, the character and the situation of the person into account.[37]

Exactly because history (natural history included) is the ultimate foundation of reality, there can be no ultimate knowledge. What there can be is better and less good explanations of natural processes, useful applications, differentiated experience – and understanding of how all this is historically given. History is however not only what has been done, but also what has happened. Therefore it is problematic to take intentionality as a criterion of historicity. History is also expression (*Ausdruck*). These two concepts – intentionality and expression – offer a possibility to rethink the relation between nature and culture or, more precisely, between natural and cultural history. From this perspective one could say that nature *as culture* constitutes our privileged access to *reality*. The space thus rendered accessible can be called *world*.

One should not confound *nature as historical experience* with the natural world of instrumentally interesting experiments, even if such experimental experience of course as human experience belongs to history. As a historical phenomenon science is important because of all the conditions it manifests as a historical fact – and not because of strong ontological claims for its

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[37] In *Explanation and Understanding* (p. 137) there is the following statement: "Generalizing and simplifying one could say something like this: causal explanations which look for sufficient conditions are not *directly* relevant to historical and social research." As a historian I have some difficulties to understand this claim and would prefer to distinguish between sufficient causes and sufficient historical conditions. Causal explanations are not able to give any sufficient historical conditions, but concern aspects of the experimentally confirmed world (where they inside a closed causal system can be regarded as sufficient *causes*). From a historical point of view these aspects will never be sufficient conditions, but rather in another language game express something which the historian would regard as a necessary (but mostly quite trivial) historical condition. The aim of historical research is to promote understanding of specific relevant nuances and render this picture as complete as possible (give sufficient *conditions*). Oxygen was perhaps a necessary condition for the Russian revolution, but certainly not a sufficient one. I think this precision is in accordance with von Wright's major insight that causality presupposes the practical scheme of action.

objects. Through existence and incarnation nature is present in history and in this primordial givenness there is always a retroactive dimension, too. When a human child is born, the world is already there as something the child will be dependent upon. When the child breaths on earth a whole constellation of air, sun, plants, lungs, and whatever we want to call such crucial conditions, is already there – not only the particular instantaneous stream passing through the chest. What is given is meaningful and important, but it involves a lot more than the objects and the objectives for an intersubjective community and is exactly because of this impossible to control.

Gadamer is right in stressing that history is more *Sein* than *Bewußtsein,* but this point becomes ontologically even more crucial if nature is part of history. The historical process – *Geschichte* in the sense of *Geschehen* – surpasses every interpretation and expresses reality as such. One could say that the historical world is the accessible space of reality and in this world some aspects are more natural, others more cultural (*nature* and *second nature,* as Aristotle would put it).

The Reflective Stance

If orientation into the future is an essential element in predictive explanatory science, it seems that the critique of reflection is no good starting point for describing the specific character of understanding. Used in a broad sense reflection should however not be linked to an inner sphere of necessary conditions, like the *a priori* of transcendental philosophy. If personhood is a way of belonging to reality through a *modal finitude* which gives the person a world in which to orient himself, reflection concerns this world as such and not a pretended inner sphere of pure subjectivity. Understanding "backwards" (re-flection) means rather something like discovering implicit presuppositions of things as they appear inside the finite way of being which is given to us through our existence in a meaningful *world* springing forth from a much more indeterminate *reality*.

In the Greek sources of our philosophical tradition there seems to be something of a direct relevance in this context, but without the inherent problems of modern philosophies of subjectivity. One can especially mention *theorein*, *scholê* and *eremia* as these functions figure in Aristotle with his stress of the human soul as both a principle of life and something spirited and linked to language (*logos*). On the other hand, we are perhaps reluctant to accept all the presuppositions of Aristotelian metaphysics, especially the tendency to take unchangeable principles for granted, a view which Aristotle shared with Plato. A strong stress on history suggests another ontology, which can however learn a lot both from Greek tradition and some modern currents with a similar stress on the inherent order of reality (Hegel). When one searches for a given order behind reality or in actual historical processes there is however a simple fact which is often taken for granted and not recognized in its philosophical significance – namely that the past cannot be changed and thus is given in a way which is so to say absolute.[38] The historical process is what springs forth from such a past. Historical understanding is thus not a *savoir pour prévoir, afin de pouvoir*.[39] It is more like insight in the givenness of the past and only indirectly related to the possibilities thus offered. Using historical knowledge for the future is certainly possible and important, but does not that much offer understanding, rather it means coming back from insight to praxis. Historical understanding is educative, important in the future life of action, with consequences both preventive and inciting, *but without being focusing on such a relevance*. Action does not only spring forth from deliberation and practical intentions with an explicit focus on future states of being, but also grows from personality with its sediments of insight and richness of regard (*Bildung*). In the latter case consequences grow

[38] Cf. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* 1139b.

[39] The famous formula resumed the idea of positivist research in the vein of Auguste Comte. See for example A. Comte, *Discours sur l'ésprit positif,* Société positiviste internationale, Paris 1923, especially I.1.15.

forth without necessarily being explicitly intended. Future is a lot more than a field of possible projects (*Entwürfe)*.[40]

The idea of an implicit source of consequences in human life was present from the beginning in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Who has already appropriated elements of tradition is not anymore capable to distinguish between what is own and what is not. A central idea in *Wahrheit und Methode* is that this opaque dimension of historicity is hermeneutically crucial. In approach and way to write, this becomes visible through implicit references, which are not possible to construct as if one would have a total control over the sources. Because the influences are appropriated, i.e. integrated into one's personal life, tradition has a new offspring in oneself and one does not know anymore, from where one had this or that idea. The author has added his particular personality to his influences and modified their content, slightly or sometimes even radically, and he is only partly able to state these modifications as difference in point of view. Well known is of course also how hard it is to tell what an original content could be as no source is without a context. It can thus be said that the essence of living tradition lies in variations around given themes. Reflection is the capacity to bring up and dwell on such themes – and does not as such presuppose any possibility of giving ultimate knowledge of what something is. Neither does reflection mean a perspective from nowhere. Quite to the contrary, there would be nothing to reflect upon without the immanence of our belonging to an ongoing historical process which as reality (*Wirklichkeit*) is something which constitutes the realisation (*Verwirklichung*) of given preconditions, including such preconditions which we tend to regard as natural and Aristotle meant when he spoke of a *physis* which as first nature is different from the more explicitly cultural second nature (habit).

Conclusion

History is traditionally the great challenge for understanding. Without nature, history however risks to become only a matter of human culture. To add that humanity is continuously confronted with something non-human does not suffice to correct this erroneous conception. What is overlooked is the simple fact that culture is *a mode of being* – and such a particular way of being is not something we can locate. It has no spatial place, because it is a way of being disposed. Accordingly, there is no definite line of demarcation between what is cultural and another non-cultural sphere of reality. Reality already works so to say *inside* our cultural world, or more precisely: there is nothing in culture which makes it possible to locate it inside a border. Culture is not a human space inside reality, but a specific human way of inhering in reality, which is thus given as an indeterminate real foundation of the modal finitude, which we call our world. Therefor nature cannot be regarded as something external to culture, but must be understood as a specific aspect of our cultural world. This aspect can be called *life* and has some kinship, not only with Aristotle's conception of nature and second nature, but also with Spinoza's less teleological idea of a *natura naturans*: a creative process, which brings itself to expression[41] in history. Inside this singular historical process, in which the now turns possibilities into given irrevocabilities, there are multiple strains, nuances, variation which renders the process complex and rich in meaning. For objectivistic conceptions of reality this means that their epistemic claims can have validity only inside an orientation which has opted for objectification as its main strategy. Such a strategy is meaningful and in several contexts also legitimate because of the aims and ends presupposed – but itself, it can never be understood

[40] In this context the influence from poststructuralist French tradition has contributed with some new perspectives for which Gadamer in his later philosophy was quite open. See especially the text "Hermeneutik auf der Spur" in *Gesammelte Werke,* Band 10, J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), Tübingen 1995.

[41] Cf. G. Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression,* Èditions de Minuit, Paris 1968.

through the objective sphere which it has constituted. What can be understood is however the constellation of ends, motives, research activity and results, i. e. the specific modality of being in such manifestations of reality. We inhere in reality in several ways, and the epistemic mode is certainly an essential one.

To understand such a processual history does not mean to determine more precisely relations between cause and effect, but to understand patterns of history, their importance and their presence, affective presence included. Causality in the modern sense is one essential means of objectifying reality – a reality which would concern us in a more immediate way without this distanciation. Because we understand *what concerns us*[42], and not what we objectify, there is a certain conflict between objectifying explanation and understanding – but this does not of course mean that explanatory research could not be understood insofar as it remains an expression of human concerns. Nature as something which can be understood is not an objective sphere of explanatory science, but must be regarded as a historical life process, which renders objectification with its different criteria of correctness possible. The ontological importance of science lies in the fact that it expresses real patterns of reality and thus contributes to the world in which human beings orient themselves – concerned as they are.

[42] As far I understand, this also seems to be what Gadamer intends with the recurrent expression *Betroffenheit* in *Wahrheit und Methode*.